

THE WAR ON ALIENATION

A KPFA Commentary by
Henry Anderson
February 5-6, 1965

My feelings about the so-called "War on Poverty" are, to say the very least, mixed. In some respects, it may prove a harbinger of significant social change. I shall return to that point later. But in many ways, at the level of concrete application, it seems to me dishonest and dangerous. For example, I fear that the so-called "Job Corps" may have the ultimate effect of creating new wards of the government. There are no jobs for these youths to go into after they finish their year or two in camp, and the government can't just turn them loose -- can it?

For another example, in its application to farm laborers, the "War on Poverty" seems to me little more than a new government subsidy to the low-wage system in agriculture, and to the exclusion of this industry from social and labor legislation. It bids fair to tear down farm workers' self-confidence and morale even as it builds them segregated clinics and child care centers. And if there is any one thing agricultural laborers do not need, it is further demoralization.

This is as good a way as any to summarize my misgivings about the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. It seems to me diversionary from the fundamental war which we should be waging against the fundamental enemy -- and in some cases, even aiding and abetting that enemy. In my judgment, the most serious enemy of man in our society is not poverty, but demoralization. Poverty may contribute to demoralization (although it does not do so necessarily or automatically). To the extent that it does, poverty should be a part of the larger battle. But demoralization is not peculiar to the impoverished. To single out the poor as though they have problems different in kind from the rest of society is caste thinking of the worst kind: worst because it is subtle and comes clad in the seductive raiment of authoritarian liberalism.

I have observed just as much -- and very likely more -- joylessness, and hatred, and confusion, and hopelessness, and other symptoms of demoralization among the upper middle classes of suburbia, and in the apartment world of the cities, as among the agricultural workers whom the favored tend to regard so patronizingly.

I propose that those parts of the "War on Poverty" which are worth preserving -- and there are some -- be put into a proper perspective. I suggest that that larger perspective is a war on demoralization, on estrangement, on feelings of powerlessness -- in a word, a War on Alienation. To put it very briefly, I propose that any people who get together and decide that they want to act cooperatively for any legitimate purpose should, if they wish, receive counsel and organizational assistance to help them get started.

Let me examine that proposition as my time permits. First, I conceive a War on Alienation as being designed to assist in the emergence of face-to-face groups, as distinguished from those which communicate only by correspondence or meet by proxy, with some people "representing" other people. We have had enough of A presuming to speak for B, C, D, and the rest, just because they all happen to be poor, Negroes, farm workers, Catholics, trade unionists, or

whatever. This is one of the major ways in which B, C, D, and the rest have become demoralized. They need to speak and act for themselves, directly, with respect at least to some corner of their lives -- and the more corners, the better.

The face-to-face associations I envisage will be voluntary associations. By and large, persons who aren't interested in the purpose of the association simply won't participate -- but won't feel threatened or intimidated by the fact of his non-participation. The initial call for the formation of a group might take a form such as: "Anyone interested in starting a community theater cooperative is invited..." etc., etc. Of course, there are any number of different kinds of little theater groups. These differences should be fully aired. No doubt, some will not like the consensus which is reached. But these are not going to be political organizations. They are not going to wield power over anybody. There is thus no point in trying to forge uneasy "united fronts", behind which internecine warfare is waged, in the manner of political groups. Coercive and quasi-coercive groups can be more demoralizing than no groups at all. A War on Alienation must recognize this danger, and contain built-in safeguards against it, insofar as possible. If someone strongly feels that he has a better idea for a theater cooperative, he should feel free to organize another one, and receive technical assistance without prejudice.

When I use the word "cooperative," I don't mean the kind of Co-op in which you buy a share for \$5 and absolutely nothing more is ever required of you. The word "cooperation" is, to me, a very active sort of word, implying the bona fide involvement, and responsibility, and testing, and stretching of every member. A face-to-face association, whatever its purposes, needs the talents of all its members, and, even more to the point, the members need to have their talents needed -- and a setting in which they are not only permitted, but obliged to exercise these talents. War on Alienation is a war for freedom -- but not the freedom to continue being unproductive and untested, which seems to me no freedom at all, but the very dungeon in which most of us languish.

The heart of my proposal is that these face-to-face associations would receive organizing information and advice. Not money, mind you, but information and advice. For reasons I do not have time to go into here, I believe grants of money may do more harm than good. But it has been my experience that informed advice is always needed. There is nothing to prevent people from organizing against alienation, right now. But, at the same time, there is nothing to help them. And it isn't an easy thing to do. There are likely to be mundane problems of tax-exemption, incorporation, liability, etc. And the even more ubiquitous and more important problems are social psychological: why do human beings become organized? How? Why do they sometimes remain organized, and sometimes fall apart? How can a group continue to meet the developing needs of its members, which are, after all, not going to remain static?

In the present scheme of things, where is one to turn for advice on such questions as these? On legal matters, you may happen to have a friend who is an attorney. But this still leaves the more important social-psychological advice. Where can you go? To so-called labor organizers? To so-called behavioral scientists? The fact is that there is hardly anybody in our great, knowledgeable, competent society who has any useful knowledge at all, any real competence, in this surpassingly important area: the art of bringing people together in a meaningful sense.

If we are to be saved at all, it seems to me, it will not be by "poverty money", but by human organizers, wedded to democratic, cooperative values. Since few such persons are to be found at present, it follows that a War on Alienation must include the training of human organizers, perhaps before anything else. Although they are rare, there are enough such persons to serve as the cadre of a training program. No esoteric knowledge or skills are required. No college degrees are required. Indeed, I sometimes think they are a liability. The greatest organizer I have ever known personally is a Catholic priest who probably never had a course in behavioral science in his life. The second greatest organizer I have known personally is a Mexican-American farm worker who never went to college, or even to high school, so much as a day.

What is more, I believe that before very long, a number of persons with well-developed, practical organizing skills are going to become available to society-at-large. When the histories of this time of ours are written, I believe they will record that the supreme value of the civil rights movement was its preparation of multi-purpose organizers who, after helping 'the' oppressed liberate themselves, went on to help liberate us all. The histories will record, I think, that the master contribution of this time was not the discovery of the computer, but the rediscovery of mutual aid.

The types of liberating and humanizing things for which people may associate together are limited only by the limits of human imagination. They range from physical exercise to the most recondite intellectual exercise; from something as modest as cooking or gardening to something as ambitious as the creation of an orchestra or a white-collar union. One of the possibilities which intrigues me, because it seems to me an area in which our society is particularly barbaric is the organization of health and medical services. I would like very much to hear your ideas for cooperative action.

Now, obviously, it cannot be left to me, or you, or to any other one person to decide what kinds of cooperative action are legitimate and which illegitimate, which humanizing and which dehumanizing.¹ But there is gradually emerging in this world a vision, somewhat blurred around the edges (and I rather think it should stay that way) of what a healthy, grown up human being is like. Existential philosophy contributes something to this vision; survivals from Freudianism contribute a little; theoretical anarchism contributes something; the scientific method, something; many disciplines, many tempers, all having in common the wish to see man fulfill himself. A few of the names which come readily to mind, in connection with this intellectual movement, are John Dewey, Martin Buber, Erich Fromm, Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, Paul Tillich. There are many more. Many of these men are still living and active. I do not know if they could be induced to serve on an advisory committee to a War on Alienation, but if they could, I think I could sleep quite secure in the conviction that they understand democratic values, and man's other needs, as well as they can be understood at this time (which is more than I feel about the people in charge of our other wars).

Obviously, there are a great many more objections and difficulties. For one thing, a proposal such as this requires bringing out into the light a number of things that most people would probably prefer not to think or talk about. It is comparatively easy to admit the material impoverishment on the

¹ Cooperation is perhaps per se humanizing. But it does not thereby justify its service to dehumanizing ends. In my personal opinion, a cooperative for obtaining narcotics, or for wife-swapping, for example, would be more dehumanizing than otherwise, and would fall outside a War on Alienation.

far side of town; it is difficult to admit the impoverishment in the quality of one's own life. It is very painful to recognize the extent to which one has wanted one's self.

I expect the most vigorous and articulate opposition to any such proposal to come from a somewhat surprising quarter: radicals and libertarians and humanists and intellectuals. These people -- and I know them well -- tend to have become old before their time, tired, disillusioned, sterile, through ~~a~~ different kinds of groups than I envisage. They have broken their hearts in floundering, futility, bickering, and backbiting in organizations which were essentially political. In many cases, they have turned against organizations as such. All they want ^{now} is to be left alone. I understand how they feel. But I am quite sure that our society will not become humanizing and fulfilling with every man isolated, any more than it is with every man marching in lockstep, bruised by the shadow of the Monolith.

The radical implications of a War on Alienation are as broad as the social order itself. Think what it would do to our compulsory miseducational institutions, our political institutions, our recreational institutions, and all the rest, to have to respond to the challenge of viable alternatives!

Let me close by mentioning what is, to my mind, perhaps the most satisfying prospect of all. Even though a War on Alienation would involve, at the outset, some government coordination, unlike any other government program I can think of, it would have the removal of government built into it. A War on Alienation would be a training ground for "subversion" -- in the sense that it would subvert the demoralizing feeling that people have to live at the pleasure of the Federal establishment or some other establishment outside the perimeter of their immediate control. A War on Alienation would subvert the demoralizing feeling that people have to fear themselves, have to doubt their own competence and capacities. Once this process were begun, it would be self-accelerating. It would not turn back. If a member of a successful "community" became involved in another group, he could serve as the advisor, without calling in an outside consultant. And so community, morale, whatever you want to call it, would spread and deepen.

You may object that governments have never taken part in their own subversion. This may be true. But these are curious times, in which yesterday's fantasy is today's commonplace. It appears to me that we are poised at the top of a great watershed, and can go either way, very far, very fast. The signs, as I read them, are that we are not going the way of 1984. I believe we are beginning, ^{however} tentatively and willy nilly, to head down the side of the watershed which leads to humanization. How else can you account for certain demonstrable facts? How can you account for the civil rights movement? How can you account for the Free Speech Movement -- and the fact that even the thickest-headed articles on the FSI have had to recognize that alienation is at its taproot? How can you account for that political weathervane, Jesse Unruh, coming out for ombudsman -- really quite a fundamental departure? How can you account for the fact that "The Triple Revolution," a much more radical analysis than anything dreamed of in the philosophy of the New Dealers and Fair Dealers, is being taken seriously even by the highest public policymakers? And to return to the point with which I began these remarks: how can you account for the fact that ^{3/4} a billion dollars' worth of public policy (a test by which, at present, one can measure how seriously our society takes something) is the direct outgrowth of a book,

The Other America, by an open, admitted, recognized, unrepentant, card-carrying Socialist? This could not have happened ten years ago, or five years ago, or even three years ago, it seems to me. The times, they are a-changing. There are strange things happening in this land.

For reasons such as these, I find it imaginable that Government itself will, within the proximate future, take a part in the destruction of the myth of its own omnipotence -- will assist those people engaged in the construction of a different social order, through something akin to what I have called a War on Alienation.

It will speed the day if you, yourself, call for it -- loudly and clearly -- and act on it, which will be louder and clearer still.